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ABSTRACT

This study examined the incidence of bullies and victims in a Department of Defense Dependents elementary school located in the Philippines. The average age of the students responding was approximately 10.7 years. The gender composition of the sample was 54% female and 46% male. No race information was obtained. The Bully Questionnaire was distributed to students (n=191) in grades 4, 5, and 6. The scale consists of nine questions designed to assess: (1) the child's self-perception, as well as his/her perception of others; (2) how the child reacts or responds to bullies; and (3) demographic data regarding the characteristics of bullies and victims in the sample studied. As this was a preliminary study, no information on the reliability or validity of the instrument was available. Findings of the overall data revealed that bullies were more often male and older than their victims. Interestingly, bullies harassed both boys and girls with approximately the same frequency. Findings suggest that girls are more likely to label themselves as bullies at an earlier age, older children (both boys and girls) perceive the bully or aggressor as being male, and boys perceive themselves as being picked on more often than girls. Changes in overall perception occurring between fourth and sixth grade, an experiential change occurring in sixth grade, and the onset of puberty are offered as explanations for differences. (BHK)

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Bully-Victim Composition in Students in a Department of Defense Elementary School

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Abstract

A recent article published in Psychology Today reported that 15% of all children in the United States will be affected by aggression, either directly or indirectly, during their school years. The present study sought to determine the incidence of bullies and victims in a Department of Defense Dependents elementary school, located overseas. Fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students (n = 191) were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to obtain information on (a) child's self- perceptions, as well as, his/her perception of others, (b) the child response to bullies, and (c) data regarding the characteristics of the bullies and victims. Findings revealed that bullies were more often male and older than their victims and that bullies harassed both boys and girls with approximately the same frequency. Further implications for research were also noted.

Bully-Victim Composition in Students in a Department of Defense Elementary School

Recently research has been directed toward understanding aggressive/bully behavior in children, and, how these behaviors effect the individual later in life. Olweus (1981) has examined several characteristics that appear to be common among bullies. He asserts that the "aggressive personality pattern" in children consists of the following characteristics: (a) they "act out" more, and more aggressively than their peers, (b) they tend to have strong aggressive tendencies and weak self-control, (c) they have a positive attitude toward violence, (d) they possess a strong need for self-assertion and dominance, (e) there is some indication that there may be disturbed parental relationships at home, and (f) they are physically and verbally abusive to teachers, as well as, peers (p. 107).

Recently, research has also been directed toward the issue of aggression and bully behavior in girls, both at home, and in the school setting. Roberts (1988) reports that girl bullies are impulsive and

dominant. They also appear to be socialized in the same manner as boys, but, are more likely to use verbal harassment than physical force. This aggressive/bully behavior in children is considered to be a learned phenomenon.

Social learning theorists and developmental psychologists (e.g., Bandura, 1963; Chance, 1988) assert that when parents punish their children by harsh or physical means, the abuse these children endure teaches them that violence is a means to an end. Children also learn aggression as a means of achieving goals and an effective way of coping with life stress.

The Victim. The children that bullies choose to target are usually boys, who seem to be anxious, insecure, unpopular, sensitive and quiet. They also tend to have a lower than normal sense of self-esteem and a negative attitude toward themselves (Olweus, 1981; Roberts, 1998). Somehow, the victim or target signals to others that he or she is insecure and feels worthless. These signals let the bully know that the victim is unlikely to stand up an aggressive attack (Roberts, 1988).

Recent studies show that one out of ten children is regularly harassed or attacked by bullies and that 15% of all school aged children are involved in bully victim problems (Roberts, 1988). The present study examined the ratio of bullies and victims in a Department of Defense Dependents elementary school.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students (n = 191) from a United States Department of Defense Dependents School, located in the Philippines. The average age of those students responding was approximately 10.7 years. The gender composition of the sample was 54% female, and 46% male. The sample also contained an approximately equal distribution of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students. A further breakdown of the sample is presented in the results. No information on race was obtained, in accordance with a request from school officials.

Materials

In order to obtain information on the composition of the sample, a questionnaire, developed by the

second author (Cuomo, 1988), was distributed to students. The scale consists of nine questions designed to assess (a) the child's self-perception, as well as, his/her perception of others; (b) how the child reacts or responds to bullies; and (c) demographic data regarding the characteristics of bullies in the present sample. As this was as preliminary study, no information on the reliability or validity of the instrument was available.

Procedure

The Bully questionnaire (Cuomo, 1988) was administered to fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students in intact classrooms during the course of a normal school day. Students were read the instructions by the examiner and allowed approximately 15 min. to fill out the questionnaires. Upon completion of the task, students and teachers were thanked for their participation by the examiner.

Results

Data for the present study is presented in the following format: (a) fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students combined and boys vs. girls; (b) sixth grade boys vs. girls; (c) fifth-grade

boys vs. girls; and finally, (d) fourth-grade boys vs. girls.

Fourth-, Fifth-, and Sixth-Grade Students Combined and Boys vs. Girls

Student's perception. Findings indicate that 5% of the total sample (n = 10) thought of themselves as a bully (5% of the boys; 6% of the girls). These findings suggest consistency between boys and girls in their overall perception of themselves with regard to bully behavior.

Seventeen percent of the present sample (n = 33) indicated that they had been called a bully. When the data was separated by gender (boys vs. girls), it was found that 23% of the boys (n = 20) and 13% of the girls (n = 13) indicated that they had been called a bully. A X^2 analysis of the data revealed no statistical significant difference between boys and girls on this question.

Boys and girls in our sample also indicated that on an average, they knew 3.85 bullies. When broken down by gender, it was found that boys in the sample reported knowing on average 4.29 bullies and reported 3.41 bullies. These findings suggest

that there are no apparent sex-difference in the present sample.

Student's reaction. Sixty-eight percent of the students reported having been "picked on" by a bully in the past (77% of the boys and 60% of the girls). Twenty five percent of the respondents reported being friends with a bully (31% of the boys and 20% of the girls).

Demographic Data. Findings with respect to the demographic data indicate that 67% of the sample reported that the bullies they were acquainted with were older than themselves; whereas, only 3% reported being older than the bullies they knew. Thirty percent of the sample reported being the same age as the bullies they knew. Finally, with respect to gender, it was reported that 89% of the bullies were boys, whereas, only 11% were girls.

Sixth-Grade Boys vs. Girls

This sample consisted of thirty-five boys and forty-one girls with an average (mean) age of 11.66.

Student's perception. Findings indicate that, while 6% of the boys considered themselves bullies, none of the girls did (00%). A X^2 analysis revealed

a significant difference between boys and girls on this question ($X^2 = 6.00$, $p < .05$), indicating that boys are more likely to consider themselves bullies than are girls in this age group. Furthermore, 29% of the sixth-grade boys acknowledged being called a bully; whereas, only 10% of the sixth-grade girls acknowledged the same fact. A X^2 analysis indicated a significant difference between boys and girls on this question as well ($X^2 = 9.25$, $p < .05$).

Finally, sixth grade boys indicated that on an average they knew 5.11 bullies, whereas, sixth-grade girls reported knowing 3.21 bullies.

Student's reaction. Eighty-three percent of the sixth-grade boys and 51% of the sixth grade girls reported having been "picked on" by a bully in the past. A X^2 analysis indicates a significant difference between boys and girls responses on this question ($X^2 = 7.64$, $p < 05$). Twenty three percent of the sixth-grade boys and 17% of the sixth grade girls reported being friends with a bully.

Demographic Data. It was found that 80% of the boys and 44% of the girls reported that the bullies they were acquainted with were older than

themselves. A X^2 revealed a significant difference between boys and girls responses on this question (x^2 = 10.45, $p < .05$). Twenty percent of the of the boys reported being the same age as the bullies they knew; whereas, 54% of the girls reported being the same age as bullies they knew. A X^2 revealed (x^2 = 15.62, $p < 05$) a significant difference in perception of age of the bully between boys and girls. None of the boys sampled and only 1% of the girls reported being older than the bullies they knew. These findings taken in combination appear to suggest that boys perceive bullies as being older than they are; whereas, girls on the other hand, perceive them (bullies) to be either older or the same age as themselves. Both boys and girls agreed that bullies were rarely younger than themselves. Finally, with respect to the gender of the bully, boys reported that that 100% of the bullies are boys, whereas, girls reported that 2% of the bullies are girls (98% were boys). This finding also indicates an overall consistency between boys and girls perception of the gender of the aggressor.

Fifth-Grade Boys vs. Girls

This sample consisted of thirty-two boys and thirty-five girls with a mean age of 10.66.

Student's perception. Findings indicate that 3% of the boys and 6% of the girls considered themselves bullies. Furthermore, 22% of the boys and 20% of the girls acknowledged being called a bully at some point in their lives. Fifth grade boys acknowledged knowing an average of 3.59 bullies; whereas, fifth-grade girls reported knowing on average 3.85 bullies. These results taken in combination suggest an overall consistency between fifth-grade boys and girls on the student perception variable.

Student's reaction. Seventy-two percent of the boys and 71% of the girls reported having been "picked on" by a bully in the past. Thirty-four percent of the fifth-grade boys and 26% of the fifth-grade girls reported being friends with a bully. Findings for fifth-grade boys and girls appear to be consistent, and indicate no differences in their reaction to bullies. Furthermore, X^2 analyses failed to reveal any statistical differences between the two groups.

Demographic Data. It was found that 84% of the boys and 71% of the girls reported that the bullies they were acquainted with were older than themselves; whereas, none of the boys and only 3% of the girls reported being older than the bullies they knew. Sixteen percent of the of the boys reported being the same age as the bullies they knew; whereas, 26% of the girls reported being the same age as bullies they knew. Finally, with respect to the gender of the bully, it was found boys reported that 94% of the bullies are boys, whereas, girls reported that 80% of the bullies are boys.

Fourth-Grade Boys vs. Girls

This sample consisted of twenty-one boys and twenty-seven girls with an average (mean) age of 9.79.

Student's perception. Findings indicate that 5% of the boys and 15% of the girls considered themselves bullies. Although the X^2 was non-significant, its interesting to note that more girls considered themselves bullies at this grade (age) level than did boys. Furthermore, 14% of the fourth-grade boys and 7% of the fourth-grade girls

acknowledged being called a bully at some time in their lives. It appears that the students perceptions of themselves may be quite different than how other students perceive them. Fourth grade boys acknowledged knowing an average of 4.19 bullies; whereas, fourth-grade girls reported knowing on average 3.18 bullies.

Student's reaction. Seventy-six percent of the boys and 59% of the girls reported having been "picked on" by a bully in the past. Thirty-eight percent of the fourth-grade boys and 22% of the four-grade girls reported being friends with a bully.

Demographic Data. With respect to the demographic data, it was found that 76% of the boys and 67% of the girls reported that the bullies they were acquainted with were older than themselves; whereas, 1% of the boys and none of the girls reported being older than the bullies they knew. Nineteen percent of the of the boys reported being the same age as the bullies they knew; whereas, 33% of the girls reported being the same age as bullies they knew. Finally, with respect to the gender of the bully,

it was found that boys reported that 86% of the bullies are boys, whereas, girls reported that 26% of the bullies are girls.

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings of the overall data (fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students in combination) revealed that bullies were more often male and older than their victims. Interestingly, we also found that bullies harassed both boys and girls with approximately the same frequency. However, we also noticed a pattern emerge regarding self-perceptions and perceptions of others.

These results taken suggest a transition in girls self-perceptions from fourth through six grade in the absence of any apparent change in boys perceptions. We found that girls in the earlier grades, were more likely to label themselves as bullies. This type of behavior decreased considerably in the sixth-grade sample of students. One may conclude from these findings that either their is a progression toward more mature behavior in girls at this point in their lives, or there is something (experientially) about the cohort group not taken into account in

this study.

With respect to perceptions of others, older children (both boys and girls), perceived the bully or aggressor as being male. Boys perceived themselves as being "picked on" more often than girls did in this group. However, in younger students (fourth-, and fifth-graders) an entirely different pattern emerged. In the fourth- and fifth-grade students we found consistency between boys and girls responses in the absence of such a consistency in the sixth-grade group.

There are several possibilities for these findings. One possibility is that there is a change in overall perceptions (both self- and perception of others) occurring between fifth- and sixth-grade in girls. Another possibility is that there is something experientially about the sixth-grade students that would explain the difference in results. It is also possible that the explanation may be related to the onset of puberty which is said to occur at somewhere between 11 and 13 years of age. However, due to the nature of this study, only further research under more stringent conditions would clarify the nature of the differences found.

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